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## THE MISSION OF SCHOOLS: PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT

by

William M. Reynolds

*What we must ask of ourselves then is to profess; to reveal and justify from our own viewpoints what we believe and value. There need be no loss in the setting forth of others' views divergent from our own in this process; but what we must risk is the loss of the posture of neutral scholarship suffused with aridity of living an uncommitted life (Macdonald in Pinar, 1989, p. 163).*

How foreign to the current process of constructing school philosophy statements James Macdonald's call for professing our values and beliefs is. The current process of constructing mission statements for schools is certainly ironic. While they should (as Macdonald indicates about curriculum) set forth the shared beliefs of a school and community, most mission statements written for public schools today are rather vacuous documents, constructed apparently to either say nothing or to say everything for everybody. They are usually constructed in some haste for the purpose of having a statement of philosophy to satisfy some bureaucratic demands. In some cases this results in schools simply borrowing other schools' equally vacuous mission statements and selecting from the tenets that "sound good." These mission statements often are either framed or hung in a relatively obscure place within the school and/or published in various school documents and placed on a shelf to gather dust. In some schools I have had the opportunity to visit, most teachers and administrators had difficulty finding the actual document and certainly had trouble articulating just exactly what the mission statements said. A potentially important statement of values and direction is lost in the shuffle to produce in an expedient manner a meaningless piece of paper.

The term "mission," replete with all of its religious connotations, is defined in one sense as giving a person a mission to perform (OED, 1978, p. 1818). So, one question for schools to consider is just exactly what the missions or statements they construct actually ask or require administrators, teachers, students and the community to perform? Especially when they are constructed in the manner and contain the vacuous content that I have described.

The "clarifying of values, of searching for new perspectives or the engaging in moral, political or aesthetic discourse" (Macdonald, 1988) is singularly absent from most mission statements and the process for developing them. This is what is so much needed in the schools and in education in general. We in education must know or at least begin to discuss why we are doing what we are doing in our schools and in our classrooms. The mission statement should be a living document which fosters in schools the type of democratic discourse which allows these important questions much discussion. The result of not having these fundamental types of discussions is that schools cling to the notion that there is "value-

free" education. Clearly there is absolutely no education that is value-free. The distinctive responsibility is for schools to develop and have goals, a point of view, one dream or another, which means schools cannot be neutral or casual in the process (Freire and Shor, 1987). One place that this dream or outlook should be articulated is in the mission statements. Yet, it appears that these are arrived at rather casually.

Questions involved in mission statement construction should be questions that concern all of humanity. The mission discourse might center on questions such as: What is a good person? What is a just society? How to relate to others? and How to best live together? (Macdonald, 1971). These questions, again, are precisely left out of mission statement discussion and construction. So, mission statement discussion and construction should include discourse on larger social, political and theoretical issues which have an inextricable link to schools.

We must in the discourse on mission statements focus on (1) developing new liberating and democratic perspectives, (2) clarifying values, (3) stimulating and developing educational thought, and (4) communicating significant ideas and values in these statements (Macdonald, 1988). The democratic perspective should be conceived of as a participatory type.

An alternative, "strong" or participatory" conception of democracy, focuses upon public participation as opposed to representation. This classical notion has posited that democracy, in the words of John Dewey, "is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experiences." This is, democracy is a way of living in which we collectively deliberate over our shared problems and prospects. It is conceived as a system in which decisions are made by those who will be directly effected by the decisions (Wood, 1988, p. 169).

So that there is, indeed, a heavy emphasis on community participation, the entire school (teachers, students, school board) and community should participate in the major decisions such as a school mission statement, rather than one person or committee of a select few determining the major policy perspectives from which a school operates. There are specific conditions for this participation. The participants working on mission statements must be decision-makers rather than decision-influencers, every decision-maker must have access to all relevant information on which decisions can be reached, and the participants must have equal power to make the resultant decisions (Wood, 1988).

This process of participatory democratic decision making is far removed from most practitioners' experience of schools and educational policy. The educational experiences of most teachers in schools is not in a participatory democratic tradition. They are most familiar and even comfortable with decisions that are made in a hierarchical fashion. Particularly in mission statement formulation, teachers are not practiced in the decision-making process. If we look at the major policy statements concerning education made in the 1980s, it is obvious that these have been made in the non-participatory or protectionist tradition. Wood (1988) provides a simple survey of the commissions that have made curricular and wider educational proclamations in this decade.



The commissions, their reports and memberships were as follows: National Commission on Excellence in Education (A Nation at Risk) - 18 members, 1 teacher; Twentieth Century Fund (Making the Grade) - 11 members, no teachers; National Science Foundation (Educating Americans for the 21st Century) - 20 members, 1 teacher; Education Commission of the States (Action for Excellence) - 41 members, 1 teacher; The Paideia Group (The Paideia Proposal) - 22 members, no teachers (Wood, 1988, p. 185; Reynolds, 1989a, pp. 88-96).

Teachers are immersed in a non-democratic milieu in which following the dictates of outside agencies with little or no representation is the status quo. Even the latest research in effective teaching practices continues this top down, non-democratic tradition. The discipline techniques, organization of classrooms, and time management are all in keeping with the hierarchical tradition. Teachers and students do not participate in a community of learners to determine even the basic ground rules of classroom operation and likewise the traditional management style in schools in which teachers are evaluated on their performance is in a top down tradition exacerbated by management schemes like those of Madeline Hunter (Reynolds, 1987). The determination of what constitutes the criterion of an evaluation is in no basic way determined either by teachers or administrators (see Foster, 1986).

In Wisconsin, like many states, the call for reform in education in the various proclamations at the national level has engendered documents at the state level. The Wisconsin proclamation is entitled Wisconsin Educational Standards: A Blueprint for Excellence. This document is known as the twenty standards document. In it schools are given certain standards with which they must comply by specific dates. They are audited by state department personnel and, if found wanting in any of the twenty areas, required to have a plan of action or provide documentation that they meet the standard(s). If they do not, they stand to lose their state funding. The disclaimer at the beginning of the document states, "Wisconsin educators and education policy-makers participated significantly in the development of Wisconsin's Blueprint for Excellence" (WDPI, 1987). Apparently educators and policy-makers are two different and distinct groups. Practitioners are part of the construction process, but the major emphasis is given to policy-makers, who are clearly not practitioners. Perhaps the practitioners are not decision-makers but decision influencers. Again, the outside bureaucratic agency has issued requirements, which practitioners have to meet.

One of the items mentioned numerous times within the document is the developing of a clear school mission (WDPI, 1987, p. 2) and a curriculum requirement of a written sequential curriculum document in grades K-12 is also to be part of that mission document.

Each School Board shall:

(k) By September 1, 1988, develop a written sequential curriculum plan in at least 3 of the following subject areas: reading, language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, health, computer literacy, environmental education, vocational education, physical education, art and music. The plan shall specify

objectives, course content, and resources and shall include a program evaluation method.

By September 1, 1989, develop a written sequential curriculum plan in at least three additional subject areas specified in subd. 1.

By September 1, 1990, develop a written sequential curriculum plan in all of the remaining subject areas specified in subd. 1 (WDPI, 1987, p. k).

This is typical of the bureaucratic demands teachers in this country face daily. It is fundamental to understanding schools and teachers to understand the constraints and intensification (Apple, 1986) they are functioning under at the present time. A view of one school's attempt to function within these constraints and improve the education offered proves helpful in understanding these situations.

### **The Sugar Creek Experience**

It is within this non-participatory tradition that I and others (specifically six CESA members and 11 staff members) have been working on a school improvement plan which included the construction of a mission statement. CESA (Cooperative Educational Service Agency) serves to provide schools within its boundaries service that they cannot afford to support individually. I worked with the CESA group, which we now call the curriculum cadre, for a year (1987-1988). The cadre began as a curriculum seminar in which we as a community discussed many of the ideas of reconceptualization. We read and discussed various works from within contemporary curriculum discourses. Discussions centering on curriculum as a political text, a gender text, a racial text, a religious text, and an autobiographical text were pursued. The opportunity then came to work with a public school in Sugar Creek, a small rural town in northwestern Wisconsin. It has a student population of approximately 400 with two administrators and 27 teachers. The school district was due to be audited by the state in January 1989 to determine whether or not it was functioning properly within the rubric of the twenty standards. The superintendent placed a call to the CESA curriculum coordinator and she enlisted our curriculum cadre as a working group. They were calling our group in desperation. They needed to have some answers for the state and it was November. They were feeling the pinch of the Twenty Standards. The curriculum cadre had discussed the standards during its monthly discussions. We felt that to simply dismiss these standards as worthless would not allow us the opportunity to work with schools and practitioners in ways to reconceptualize education (see Reynolds, 1989a, 1989b). We, therefore, accepted the opportunity to participate with Sugar Creek in a plan to improve their school.

It was fascinating to begin working with this school district. The administration and teachers expected us to come to the school and basically write for them or, at the very least, tell them what to write to satisfy the bureaucratic demands that had been placed upon them. We had decided as a group not to fall into a traditional trap of outside experts coming into a school and telling them what was good for them. Our initial meeting was somewhat different. For weeks the curriculum cadre had been working on a list of assumptions and ground rules we were making about schools and school improvement. We decided to take this list to the first meeting, which included administrators, teachers, school board members, parents, and other community people and discuss these assumptions with the teachers as a



first exercise in participatory decision making. Students would be included in the process, but not at this point. We felt that we had to start at some point and this made the best sense at the time. The list of assumptions contained nine points.

1. Given the current knowledge about learning and the present situation in our society, school improvement is important. This will be a type of model project. With any model project, there is potential to be innovative. There is also risk involved for all who are seeking new ways of doing what they do. Therefore, cooperation and open communication is imperative.
2. The education of students is the focus of our reconceptualization effort. It is therefore important to relate knowledge, attitudes and skills to student experience.
3. Curriculum is defined as the student's total educational experience. This includes the classroom, the school environment and all human interaction which takes place.
4. The entire community (students, teachers, administrators, school board members, parents and other community members) need to be helped to critically use knowledge, skills and attitudes to make informed personal and political decisions and to work for the welfare of the global community.
5. Human knowledge is not necessarily organized around disciplines, but around social needs and problems of the people involved in the educational process.
6. The education provided through the district should use all the knowledge available including the most current knowledge about education. The values should be designed to help clarify what we know and value and the degree to which we are or are not achieving our goals. Change will be initiated to help move toward what we value.
7. Administration is open, caring and committed, and would be available to help their staff facilitate needed changes.
8. We believe our role in this project is to help empower the Sugar Creek staff to make wise decisions about everyday practice.
9. We must all, CESA, university, administration, all school staff, students, parents and community members, determine the ground rules for interacting as part of this effort.

The ground rules were produced in a participatory manner and reflect the emphasis in participatory decisions.

- I. Equality of opportunity to participate
  - dialogue helps to clarify our beliefs via one another
  - feel free to say what you think
  - each person is responsible to present their point of view to the group
- II. Confrontation and argumentation are encouraged
  - listen to others
  - keep the discussion focused
  - freedom to disagree
- III. Openness to various points of view is required
  - all input is valid for consideration
  - there must be a spirit of inquiry
  - don't form judgements too quickly without exploring reasons
  - honesty
  - support everyone's right to his or her own opinion
- IV. Dialogue is only the beginning and it is hoped that this interaction will stimulate new relationships as we work together
  - each individual is responsible for making the process work
  - support all your opinions with reasons
- V. Share your experiences so that we all grow together in our understanding. Everyone has experience and expertise to share.

The assumptions and ground rules were written in language that attempted to avoid mystification, language with which the participants were comfortable. It was felt that to use obfuscating language at the outset would be detrimental to the entire process.

Following these initial meetings the administration, teaching staff, school board, parents and community members were asked to form a working focus group. These focus groups were divided in their responsibilities, centering their attention on various of the twenty standards and other issues germane to Sugar Creek. The focus groups included curriculum and instruction, school leadership, community relations, and others. There was also a coordinating committee comprised of representation of each working/focus group. These were not the chairpersons of the groups but the recording secretary so that accuracy was maintained. This coordinating committee's primary responsibility was producing a discussion draft of the school mission statement, which would then be discussed following the assumptions and ground rules set in place.

The first few half day meetings were a unique experience for the members of the various committees. We did not automatically begin the meeting by starting to write a mission statement. We began by reading and discussing various articles concerning views of education. We read, debated and discussed over the course of the first few meetings articles by various authors in the reconceptualization genre (Pinar, 1988; Apple, 1988; Giroux in Giroux, Penna and Pinar, 1981; Reynolds, 1987; Stanley, 1982). We then began to discuss value orientations concerning education. Some teachers as well as administrators in the group began to get uneasy. They were not feeling discomfort over the ideas. In fact, many of them said that they had felt the validity of ideas such as these for a long time, yet there were never confirming voices with whom they could discuss the issues. What they were uncomfortable with was the fact that they had participated in a number of meetings and no mission statement had been constructed. This led to a long discussion about product-oriented education and the theoretical assumptions underlying this perspective.

One of the first products to emerge from the initial series of meetings was a values list. It became clear after discussion that education was not a value-free enterprise. The values were listed in two columns, the traditional educational values on one side and the "reconceptualized" values on the other. The first appeared to be consistent with everything that these teachers were immersed in at present time. Terms such as effectiveness, efficiency, time on task all appeared on the "traditional" list. But they also began to construct a shared value list, not simply a list of values that they had heard were good values. Their values flowed from the assumptions that we constructed in the first few weeks and these values, which included responsibility, respect, and student centeredness, were in direct contrast to the other values that emerge in most mission statements.

After about four months, the group decided that it was time to construct the mission statement although they did not want to create a typical narrative document. It was agreed after much debate to construct a series of belief statements which could function as the driving direction for the school. The initial discussions produced a list of twenty-two belief statements that were consolidated. The resulting working mission statement was produced.

### **Sugar Creek Mission Statement**

#### **BELIEFS**

#### **WE BELIEVE:**

that the education provided in Sugar Creek should foster both excellence and equity.

#### **STUDENTS**

that education through an atmosphere of shared responsibility and decision making should produce responsible and participating members of a democratic society.



that education should foster individuals who are flexible, critical and creative in their thinking.

that caring and concern must be demonstrated to and developed in our students.

### INSTRUCTION

that curriculum and instruction in the school must be active and participatory, allow for individual differences, and at the same time meet standards set by outside agencies.

that a progressive, accountable and creative approach to programs and student development is necessary.

### COMMUNICATION

that communication and support among the community, school personnel, and students is necessary for the total development of the child.

that schools are a democracy and therefore decision making on the part of students, school personnel, school board, and the community should be participatory.

### CURRICULUM

that curriculum is defined as the student's total educational experience. This includes the classroom, the school environment and all human interaction that takes place.

that human knowledge is not necessarily organized around disciplines, but around social needs and problems of people.

that school spirit and pride should be infused in curricular and co-curricular activities in order to develop and maintain traditions of our community.

that the responsibility of co-curricular activities is to develop cooperation, responsibility and trust.

### SOCIETY

that our society is enhanced by open-minded students who recognize that understanding of the larger social community is an integral part of their education.

that society is culturally diverse and that school should provide culturally diverse content, issues and opportunities and examine various modes of inquiry.

### EVALUATION

that literacy is an important component of a modern education and furthermore that students should not only be able to read and write, but demonstrate the ability to critically analyze what they see, read and hear.

that technological literacy should be a component of a modern education and furthermore that critically understanding the societal and/or ethical impacts of that technology should also be emphasized.

This mission statement could suffer the same fate as all other mission statements that have been discussed. But, there is a conscientious effort not to let the mission statement collect dust. The community has and is making an effort to have this mission be a guiding force in the school. The mission statement was taken back to the entire school community for acceptance and revision. It is called a working mission statement indicating that it can be revised as the school continues its improvement process.

One illustration might be useful, although the parameters of this paper allow for only a brief explanation. The development of a curriculum is also an activity with which the Sugar Creek school project is engaged and the mission statement begins to be influential at this stage. Curriculum was a project that the Sugar Creek teachers and others began to be concerned with in the summer of 1989, a process which began with the assumption that all curriculum developed should foster the beliefs articulated in the mission statement. An issues or problem-oriented curriculum is being developed which uses the mission statement as its directing imperatives. While this is certainly a different way to develop curriculum, it will meet the standard set by the state of developing written sequential curriculum. Other structures, both at the administrative and pedagogic levels, will come under consideration for change as this curriculum is being developed. Interdisciplinary understandings and teaching is one area under discussions for change. Other focus groups have also begun to use this document as a guide to develop their respective goals.

A rather remarkable phenomenon has occurred in the total participatory development of this project and the mission statement.

Through such local participation, citizens come to formulate and take seriously decisions made on an immediate level, and develop those skills and attitudes necessary for self-governance at the national level.

The term to describe such a state is a sense of political efficacy. That is, the belief that individual political action does have an impact on decision-making; therefore, performing one's civic duties is worthwhile (Wood, 1988, p. 170).

Teachers and others who have been part of this ongoing project have developed this sense of political efficacy or empowerment. The teachers were responsible for presenting to the



entire board of education at the end of the 1988-1989 school year a report of their activities in this project. The teachers, who usually are apprehensive about such presentations, prepared their report with the utmost seriousness and power. They presented their material including the mission statement with extreme satisfaction. When questioned about various topics they responded with authority. They knew what they were defending or supporting because they had been instrumental in its construction. The teachers actually became strong advocates of the positions described in the mission statement. The mission statement had some meaning because the ideas contained in the statement were theirs.

As we move into the second year of the project, we will have much greater student participation. We all have to begin to develop projects within the limitations of the specific environment. We felt that we were pushing at the boundaries of acceptability with what we were pursuing at Sugar Creek. It appears now that the limit has been expanded and student participation can be included. Since the mission statement is a working one, students' viewpoints and perspectives will be reflected. The students will also serve on all of the groups. They too will struggle and work, hopefully beginning to develop that political efficacy that others in the project have developed.

## **Conclusions**

It is necessary in this time of increasing standardization, top-down control, bureaucratization, and a "more is better" ideology to develop in schools and communities participatory democracies.

The efforts at Sugar Creek are only one case where this is being attempted but since other work is also being accomplished, it is necessary to network about these issues and projects so that those involved also create larger communities where this concept of democratic schools can be discussed. We must participate in these school projects so that our continual development is tempered by the fundamentals of school life. These must take place at many institutions, but particularly at the level of the public schools.

Perhaps efforts such as this and others will actually give those in education a direction and sense of mission. As John Dewey stated:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the actions of others to give point and direction to this own, is equivalent to breaking down those barriers of class, race and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity (Dewey, 1966, p. 87).

Projects like mission-statement development and school improvement can only hope to be a part of this process.

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